

STEVE FULLER

(Auguste Comte Chair in Social Epistemology, University of Warwick)

Could a Reflexive Historical Epistemology Revolutionize the Academy?

I regard historical epistemology as ultimately about how our causal intuitions relate to things that matter to us – be they for personal, political or professional reasons. Our intuitions about how such things came about help to specify how much and what sort of concern we should have for them. To be sure, these intuitions are informed – and transformed – by our ongoing empirical inquiries in the past and present. My own thinking about these matters has been grounded in the Needham Thesis, which in its strong form says that modern science would probably not have arisen at all had it not arisen in the Christian West. Much of what academics today claim to be as both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ about science at a global level seems to be rooted in this common historical intuition.

My talk will focus on the academy’s self-understanding in light of this delicate process, whereby our understanding of causation and concern is so intimately connected. Here I draw a broad distinction between an outcome that is ‘underdetermined’ (i.e. need not have happened as it did, if at all) and ‘overdetermined’ (i.e. had to happen by some means or other). My own view is that academics should be in the business of reverse engineering epistemic outcomes that seem to be historically ‘overdetermined’ such that they end up appearing ‘underdetermined’. This is something that innovators routinely try to do in the sphere of technology, which when successful result in a ‘creative destruction’ of markets. In the academic context, this policy would challenge the default position of academics who try to legitimize their knowledge production in terms of some path-dependent conception of their discipline’s ‘paradigm’, aka ‘standing on the shoulders of giants’.

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University of Milan, Dept. Of Philosophy, via Festa del Perdono 7, 20122 Milano

Further information @ <http://www.filosofia.unimi.it/guzzardi> | luca.guzzardi@unimi.it